

Tiger tourism: Lobbies fight tooth and nail

NitinSethi, TNN Aug 14, 2012, 01.53AM IST

Tags:

- [Tiger tourism in India](#)
- [tiger conservation](#)
- [Supreme Court](#)
- [environment ministry](#)

NEW DELHI: Should tourism be allowed a free run in forests that are breeding grounds of tigers? A curious case in the Supreme Court to restrict flourishing tourism in the core of tiger reserves has got many agitated.

CMs and state forest ministers are writing to the Centre demanding tourism remain unfettered in their territories. The environment minister and wildlife officers in the ParyavaranBhawan are inundated with calls. High-decibel tiger conservationists and resort owners — at times there is little distinction between the two — are engaged in hectic lobbying with their power buddies across party lines. Forest officials in states have turned unsure of whether tigers bring tourists to their forests or tourism protects the animal.

Top lawyers are engaged by various 'interested' parties. Some other conservationists and tribal groups are holding meetings to discuss how to tackle the fallout of the apex court's final decision, which is likely soon. Ironically, amid this hubbub, tribals and poor farmers, who live in proximity to tiger, are caught in the legal cross fire, and are fast becoming collateral damage.

It began with a petition in the SC on whether tourism should be allowed in the core of tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh. The court took up the issue in earnest forcing the Union government to file its recommendations that it was dragging its feet on for several years, unwilling to rein in the powerful tourism-combo.

But, the court went a step ahead and also ordered that buffer areas - with thousands of farmers and other poor tribals, besides industry and other businesses — around core of tiger reserves be demarcated. Creating buffer areas gives forest department greater control over land, irrespective of whether they are used for agriculture or mining.

The environment ministry took the middle path on tourism. It finally recognized the irony in allowing tour operators, touts, conservationists-turned-entrepreneurs and camera and gear-loaded tourists to walk into forests when poor tribals had been thrown out for conserving the big cat and its breeding grounds.

It agreed that the people in vicinity of tiger reserves were making little out of the business where resort-owners can earn upward of Rs 40,000 a night at times against the guarantee of a rare glimpse of the elusive animal.

Recommendations were made to weed out tourism from the core of tiger reserves (which are legally meant to be inviolate or free of people) over the next five years and the wildlife tourism business around the national parks and sanctuaries be taxed 10% of their revenue to provide some money to conservation and local tourism.

The guidelines, now before the apex court, have got the tourism groups and the state governments (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand) up in arms and hectic lobbying is on.

A motley conglomeration of conservationists and rights groups - Friends of Conservation - have warned that under the ruse of court-imposed deadline, state governments are violating the Wildlife Protection Act and the Forest Rights Act to demarcate the buffers, overriding provisions of these laws which protect the rights of the poor in vicinity of the wildlife zones. Ironic, many point out, since the same state governments are preparing affidavits and writing letters to protect tourism in tiger reserves.

Officials warn, albeit in hushed tones, that land around tiger reserves are quietly being hived off in benami transactions to bypass land-transfer rules. Farmers and tribals with little other option are selling their land than facing the brunt of forest-raaj.

Source: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-08-14/wild-wacky/33200121_1_tiger-reserves-tiger-tourism-forest-rights-act